

Monday Morning

AS PAKISTAN BATTLES ITS TALIBAN THE 'GREAT GAME' CONTINUES



Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari (left) with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana during his meeting with EU and NATO officials in Brussels last week



Police searching vehicles at a security checkpoint in Islamabad last week. As the capital braces itself for more Taliban attacks, the city has come to resemble a war zone

A suspected US missile strike killed five people in Pakistan's northwestern tribal belt on June 18, where the military is poised to attack a feared Taliban commander, officials said. The attack hit 20 kilometers from the main town of Wana in South Waziristan, where Washington says Al-Qaeda and Taliban rebels who fled after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan are hiding, plotting attacks on the West. "Five people were killed in the attack", said a local intelligence official who did not want to be named as he was not authorized to speak to the media. A senior tribal administrative official based in the Northwest's main city Peshawar said the target appeared to be a training camp run by a local Taliban

▶ The US military does not, as a rule, confirm drone attacks, but its armed forces and the Central Intelligence Agency operating in Afghanistan are the only forces that deploy the unmanned drones in the region.

On June 16 Pakistan's military indicated that the government had ordered an offensive into the tribal belt along the Afghan border to attack Pakistani Taliban chief Baitullah Mehsud and his network.

Targeted strikes have been reported in South Waziristan and other tribal regions, although a full-fledged offensive did not appear to have begun late last week.

Pakistani troops had already been fighting a more than seven-week battle to dislodge Taliban insurgents from three other northwestern districts, and claimed to have almost completed their mission in the Swat Valley.

But analysts have said the tribal areas present a far greater challenge, with Mehsud's fighters -- believed to number up to 20,000 -- entrenched in the hostile mountain terrain and easily able to slip into hideouts in Afghanistan.

A senior US defense official said recently that any operation into South Waziristan would work best with "pressure on both sides of the border".

About 90,000 foreign troops -- most of them from the United States -- are currently deployed in Afghanistan to battle an insurgency by the resurgent Taliban, which was ousted from government by the 2001 US-led invasion.

The United States Administration, which has put Pakistan at the heart of its strategy to battle Al-Qaeda, has welcomed the Swat offensive, but the drone attacks are a source of tension between Washington and Islamabad.

Pakistan publicly opposes the strikes, saying they violate its territorial sovereignty and deepen resentment among the populace. Since August 2008, more than 40 such strikes have killed nearly 400 people.

'UNCLEAR IF PAKISTAN OFFENSIVE SERVES US INTERESTS'

Pakistan's offensive against Taliban militants has won praise from Washington but may bring little benefit to American forces in Afghanistan, experts and US officials say.

Having pressed Pakistan to take on Islamist militants on its soil, Washington has hailed Islamabad for its anti-Taliban military campaign launched in April.

But Islamabad has not targeted Washington's main enemies -- Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders on the Pakistani border -- and instead has directed its assault on Pakistani Taliban, officials and

commander named Wali, also known as Malang. "According to my information, more than one drone fired four missiles at a camp of Taliban commander Malang", the official said.

analysts point out.

Pakistan's interests "don't necessarily align 100 percent with the US as well as allies' interests", said a US defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Pakistani forces are focusing on the Taliban commander Mehsud and his network, blamed for a wave of attacks that have killed nearly 2,000 in the nuclear-armed country in the past two years.

"It appears as though Pakistan still has the same policy as before and continues to differentiate between the 'good Taliban', being the ones who attack US and NATO forces, ...and the 'bad Taliban', like Baitullah Mehsud, being the ones who attack the Pakistani government", said Malou Innocent of the CATO Institute.

The problem is that "at a strategic level Pakistan and the US are not on the same page", Innocent said. "Until US lawmakers recognize that, we are going to be in Afghanistan in perpetuity".

Islamabad remains reluctant to move against Afghan Taliban, such as militants led by Mullah Omar or the Haqqani network, as it views them as useful in countering the influence of its arch-enemy India in Afghanistan, analysts explain.

"India does have an influence in Afghanistan and Karzai has a friendly relationship with India", commented Caroline Wadhams, national security analyst at the Center for American Progress.

"They are scared that the US will get out of Afghanistan and that Afghanistan becomes more and more of an Indian satellite.

"So they keep these groups of Afghan Taliban around that are attacking into Afghanistan to stem the growing influence of India in Afghanistan", she suggested.

President Barack Obama's Administration insists the Pakistan offensive serves US interests, though not necessarily delivering a direct benefit in Afghanistan, where 56,000 US troops are serving along with about 34,000 allied foreign troops.

"The Pakistani extremist threat was a very urgent threat, very close to Islamabad and extending in geography", said a senior US defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Islamabad's army operations have put pressure on members of the Al-Qaeda network allied with Pakistani Taliban and cut off a potential safe haven in the Swat Valley, the official said.

"There are some groups that we'd like the Pakistanis to take more action against, for example the Afghan Taliban, but we share a common interest against the Pakistan Taliban".

US officials acknowledge the army assault in the Swat Valley has had no effect on the movement of militants across the border into Afghanistan from bases in Pakistan.

While Washington has welcomed plans by the Pakistan army to open up a second front in South Waziristan, some analysts say the move in the lawless tribal belt could push militants over the border to neighboring Afghanistan.

ISLAMABAD, A BATTLE ZONE

As the Pakistan army presses its offensive in the Northwest, the

Taliban have retaliated by making terrorist attacks on the cities.

Agitated commuters queue up every morning rush hour on the wide avenues of the capital, Islamabad, their cars snaking back from security checkpoints manned by heavily-armed police and paramilitary forces.

Pakistan's capital, with its manicured lawns, stately houses and imposing government buildings is increasingly resembling a war zone as the Taliban take their battle to the cities, with a wave of devastating attacks in recent weeks.

Blast walls have swallowed UN buildings, embassies and ambassadors' homes. To enter the Serena Hotel, one of Islamabad's two five-star hotels, visitors must navigate four security barriers manned by jittery guards.

Dozens of new police checkpoints have been set up on Islamabad's main highways and streets inside the city after authorities issued orders to boost security, taking it to unprecedented levels, residents say.

"We can't cross even a street to the other side without going through stiff checks," complained Hassan Khan, a local businessman.

The capital is about 250 kilometers southeast of the Swat Valley, where the army is locked in its offensive against the Taliban, enraging militants who have carried out a series of revenge attacks.

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan movement led by Mehsud has threatened more strikes on key installations in Pakistan's urban centers, putting everyone on edge.

Clad in a bulletproof jacket and a finger on the trigger of his submachine gun, elite commando police constable Sajid Abbas eyes every passing vehicle.

"It is our duty to safeguard this homeland from the terrorists and we are proud to serve our nation", said a bullish Abbas, wearing a black T-shirt emblazoned with the logo "No Fear" on the back.

As of June 18, at least 134 people had been killed in suicide attacks and bombings in the capital since government forces fought radical gunmen holed up in Islamabad's Red Mosque in July 2007. Nationwide, 1,995 people had been killed in attacks.

Past targets have included Islamabad's Marriott Hotel, the Danish embassy, an Italian restaurant and police checkpoints and buildings.

In a recent attack in the capital, a suicide bomber walked up to a police building on June 6 in a residential district home to many government officials and detonated explosives strapped to his body, killing two policemen.

On June 17 police arrested three men suspected of planning a suicide attack near Islamabad and seized explosives and suicide jackets; meanwhile four other suspects were being held in the capital.

Now, vehicles have to crawl through concrete barriers manned by up to seven police -- some hunkered down behind sandbags -- as security forces peer into the cars, waving some through but pulling other nervous drivers over.

"We are keeping an eye on every vehicle with thorough checking of

suspected persons”, said Sub Inspector Mohammad Siddque, stationed on the Islamabad Highway, one of the main entry points from the adjacent city of Rawalpindi.

Tahir Alam, senior superintendent of Islamabad police, said that there were now 70 security checkposts throughout the capital.

But some worry about the increasingly sophisticated tactics of the militants, who have recently been able to penetrate past tough security and cause massive devastation to high-profile targets.

On June 9, three militants shot their way past the security barriers at the five-star Pearl Continental Hotel in the northwestern city of Peshawar, ramming a explosives-packed truck into the building, killing nine people.

“The terrorists come suddenly and attack with modern ammunition, which we lack. This is our weak point”, said Zia, a policeman stationed on the Kashmir Highway, glancing nervously around him.

“I heard our government has imported new bulletproof jackets, but I don't know when I'll get one”, he mused.

EU PLEDGES AID FOR PAKISTANI REFUGEES

In another development, the EU pledged aid to Pakistan last week for the hundreds of thousands of families displaced by the government offensive on the Taliban and promised to help Islamabad tackle the root causes of extremism.

At a first-ever summit in Brussels, senior European Union officials promised to study future ways to boost commerce with the regime in Pakistan, with the ultimate aim of opening a free trade area.

“The EU is ready to help in many fields and we discussed ways to do it”, Czech President Vaclav Klaus, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency, said after the three-hour meeting.

“On the one hand, the issue of humanitarian aid; on the other the much more important forum of aid which is the opening of markets for Pakistan of European countries”.

The summit, attended by Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari, came amid the massive offensive by government troops against the Taliban in the Northwest which has led some two million people to flee their homes.

As a first step, the European Commission announced that it would provide 65 million euros in new aid money to provide food, water and shelter to people who have fled the Swat Valley and other areas.

“In exchange, we want Pakistan to take the fight against terrorism very seriously and that they do a lot on their home front”, said EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

However the trade measures remained unclear.

The EU committed itself to “explore” how Pakistan might benefit from its preferential tariff regime, which affords customs privileges in return for respecting principles in the areas of workers' rights and the environment.

“We are open to consider that”, said European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

“We believe that what Pakistan needs now is short and medium-term

measures to diversify its exports", he said. "We are trying to find the most adequate measures".

He conceded that any preferential steps would have to be accepted by all members of the World Trade Organization and would be extremely difficult to push through.

Zardari remained upbeat despite the hazy nature of the pledges.

"I have great hopes and I am positive that we will have support for [the trade measures]. All these are important issues. They will help democracy become stronger in Pakistan.

"The fact that there is a commitment, and the appetite to help Pakistan, I'm very satisfied with", he said.

Earlier, at NATO headquarters, Zardari had appealed for international help to fight the Taliban, who are also helping launch cross border attacks into Afghanistan.

"With the help of the world we will win this, and half the war is the hearts and minds of the people", he declared.

Yet fears are growing of a massive humanitarian crisis.

The aid organization Oxfam called it "the world's biggest and fastest growing human displacement in over a decade" and said funds remained inadequate, with the EU targeted for its "feeble response".

Meanwhile, the rights watchdog Amnesty International urged the 27-state bloc to pressure Islamabad to protect civilians and respect the law.

"The EU should stress the importance of Pakistan fully complying with its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law in all its military operations", a statement said.

The offensive is also vital to NATO interests amid the battle to beat the Taliban-led insurgency that is undermining its biggest and most ambitious operation ever in neighboring Afghanistan.

The insurgents, backed by Al Qaeda and criminal gangs, are using Pakistan's lawless tribal areas as a base, resulting in cross-border shooting involving NATO-led forces or US operated aerial drones.

After addressing NATO ambassadors, Zardari said: "It's a constructive dialogue. We are partners together. I intend to be partners with them".



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